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ABSTRACT

Loneliness is a significant problem than can predispose young children to immediate and long-term negative consequences. This Digest presents an overview of loneliness, with suggestions for practitioners on how they can apply the research in early childhood settings. Children who feel lonely often experience poor peer relationships and feelings of sadness, malaise, boredom, and alienation. Factors that contribute to feelings of loneliness in young children include a family move, conflict within the home or the divorce of parents, rejection by peers, and lack of social skills. By asking children about their feelings and through careful observation, teachers can gain insights into children's loneliness. Teachers can focus on a number of different areas that may suggest signs of loneliness, including whether the child appears timid or anxious and whether the child is rejected by playmates. Children are rejected for many reasons, and teachers will need to assess the circumstances that seem to lead to the rejection. Children who are aggressive report the greatest degrees of loneliness. Teachers can point out the effects of the child's behavior on others, show the child how to adapt to the ongoing play, or help the child to clearly communicate feelings and desires. Children who are neglected or withdrawn also report feelings of loneliness. If children lack certain skills, the teacher can focus on giving suggestions that the child can implement. Children who are victimized by others believe that school is an unsafe and threatening place, and often express a dislike for school. Teachers can provide firm but supportive suggestions to the aggressor. Teachers can also think about how the curricula might be helpful to a child who is feeling lonely; they can also develop close relationships with children and communicate with their primary caregivers to gain valuable insights and guidance. (LPP)

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Loneliness in Young Children

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Loneliness is a significant problem that can predispose young children to immediate and long-term negative consequences. However, only recently have research and intervention in educational settings focused on young children who are lonely. It is becoming increasingly clear that many young children understand the concept of loneliness and report feeling lonely. For example, kindergarten and first-grade children responded appropriately to a series of questions regarding what loneliness is ("being sad and alone"), where it comes from ("nobody to play with"), and what one might do to overcome feelings of loneliness ("find a friend") (Cassidy & Asher, 1992). In a more recent study (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996), kindergarten children's loneliness in school was reliably measured with a series of questions such as, "Are you lonely in school?"; "Is school a lonely place for you?"; and "Are you sad and alone in school?" These studies suggest that young children's concepts of loneliness have meaning to them and are similar to those shared by older children and adults. This Digest presents an overview of loneliness with suggestions for practitioners on how they can apply the research in early childhood settings.

Consequences of Loneliness

Children who feel lonely often experience poor peer relationships and therefore express more loneliness than peers with friends. They often feel excluded—a feeling that can be damaging to their self-esteem. In addition, they may experience feelings of sadness, malaise, boredom, and alienation. Furthermore, early childhood experiences that contribute to loneliness may predict loneliness during adulthood. Consequently, lonely children may miss out on many opportunities to interact with their peers and to learn important lifelong skills. Given the importance placed on the benefits of peer interactions and friendships to children's development, this potential lack of interaction raises many concerns for teachers who work with young children. Peer relations matter to children, and lonely children place as much importance on them as do other children (Ramsey, 1991).

Contributing Factors of Loneliness

Several factors contribute to feelings of loneliness in young children. Some that occur outside of the school setting are conflict within the home; moving to a new school or neighborhood; losing a friend; losing an object, possession, or pet; experiencing the divorce of parents; or experiencing the death of a pet or significant person. Equally important are factors that occur within the child's school setting, such as being rejected by peers; lacking social skills and knowledge of how to make friends; or possessing personal characteristics (e.g., shyness, anxiety, and low self-esteem) that contribute to difficulties in making friends. Kindergarten children who are victimized by peers (e.g., picked on, or physically or verbally attacked or taunted) report higher levels of loneliness, distress, and negative attitudes toward school than nonvictimized children (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996).

Observing and Assessing Young Children

Participating in careful observation of children is a necessary first step to gain insights into children's loneliness. While observing children, teachers can focus on the following, which may suggest signs of loneliness: Does the child appear timid, anxious, unsure of himself or herself, or sad? Does the child show a lack of interest in the surroundings? Does the child seem to be rejected by playmates? Does the child avoid other children by choice? Does the child appear to lack social skills that might prevent him or her from initiating or maintaining interactions? Does the child have the necessary social skills but is reluctant to use them? Is the child victimized by peers? Does the child's apparent loneliness seem to be a consistent pattern over time, or is it a more recent phenomenon? In addition, because loneliness cannot always be observed in children (e.g., there are children who appear to have friends but report feeling lonely), teachers can spend time talking individually with children. They might ask children, "What does sad and lonely mean?"; "Are you sad and lonely?"; or "What would make you happier?" (Cassidy & Asher, 1992; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996).

When observing and assessing children, it is important to be sensitive to and aware of their developmental abilities and personal inclinations. For example, it has been suggested that young children who play alone may be at increased risk for later problems, both socially and cognitively. Many preschool and kindergarten children, however, engage in nonsocial activities that are highly predictive of competence. Therefore, over time, teachers need to observe children's interactions with their peers, talk to children about their feelings, and document their behaviors and responses to determine whether they are lonely or are happily and productively self-engaged.

Intervention Strategies and Recommendations

Although research in support of specific practices assisting lonely children in the classroom is weak, teachers might consider several approaches that may be adapted to individual children. Children who are aggressive report the greatest degrees of loneliness and social dissatisfaction (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990). Children are rejected for many reasons, and teachers will need to assess the circumstances that seem to lead to the rejection. Is the

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child acting aggressively toward others? Does the child have difficulty entering ongoing play and adapting to the situation? Does the child have difficulty communicating needs and desires? Once the problem is identified, teachers can assist the child in changing the situation. The teacher can point out the effects of the child's behavior on others, show the child how to adapt to the ongoing play, or help the child to clearly communicate feelings and desires. Children who are supported, nurtured, and cherished are less likely to be rejected and more likely to interact positively with peers (Honig & Wittmer, 1996).

Children who are neglected or withdrawn also report feelings of loneliness, although to a lesser extent than do aggressive-rejected children. Because these children often lack social skills, they have difficulty interacting with their peers. These children may also be extremely shy, inhibited, and anxious, and they may lack self-confidence (Rubin, LeMare, & Lollis, 1990). If children lack certain skills, the teacher can focus on giving feedback, suggestions, and ideas that the child can implement. Children who possess adequate social skills but are reluctant to use them can be given opportunities for doing so by being paired with younger children. This experience gives the older child an opportunity to practice skills and boost self-confidence.

Children who are victimized by others believe that school is an unsafe and threatening place and often express a dislike for school. Furthermore, these children report lingering feelings of loneliness and a desire to avoid school even when victimization ceases (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). These findings point to the importance of implementing immediate intervention strategies to reduce victimization. Teachers can provide firm but supportive suggestions to the aggressor. For example, teachers might guide and assist children in developing the life skills they need, such as respecting others and self, engaging in problem solving, working together on skills and tasks that require cooperation, and expressing feelings and emotions in appropriate ways (Gartrell, 1997).

Teachers can think about how the curricula might be helpful to a child who is feeling lonely. Some children may benefit by being given opportunities to express their feelings of sadness or loneliness through manipulation, drawing, movement, music, or creative activities (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993). Arranging the dramatic play area with props may help some children act out or express their feelings and feel a sense of control. Use of crisis-oriented books with children, referred to as bibliotherapy, may assist a child in coping with a personal crisis. Sharing carefully selected literature with children may assist in facilitating emotional health. Children who are able to express and articulate their concerns may want to talk about their unhappiness.

Developing close relationships with children and communicating with their primary caregivers can give teachers valuable insights and guidance. When teachers become aware of children who are experiencing loneliness caused by a family situation, they can lend their support in a variety of ways. Spending extra time listening can be reassuring and helpful to some children. Suggesting to a parent the possibility of inviting a peer over to the child's home may be a good idea and may help the child to form a friendship. In addition, teachers can ask parents for their recommendations about what might make the child feel more comfortable at school, and they can share relevant resources with parents, such as literature or information on parent discussion groups.

Conclusion

The issues of loneliness were once considered relevant only to adolescents and adults. Research suggests that this notion is misguided and that a small but significant portion of young children do in fact experience feelings of loneliness (Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990). As a result, the immediate and long-term negative consequences associated with loneliness in children are becoming apparent, and the need to observe children and to develop and implement intervention strategies is becoming critical. When teachers take time to focus on individual needs of children, build relationships, and assist them with their needs, children thrive (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997).

For More Information

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